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SUBJECT: ELECTION EVE PREDICTIONS: PEACEFUL, CREDIBLE,
HARDLY FAIR, BUT STILL A STEP ON THE LONG PATH TO DEMOCRACY

REF: LUANDA 692 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Angola is fast approaching a pivotal moment in its much troubled history. Within hours, polling booths across Angola will open for the first time in 16 years and only the second time in the history of the nation. At 7:00 AM on Friday, September 5, about 12,400 voting stations are slated to begin the 11-hour voting day. Even before the first vote is cast, however, these elections have already made history in the sense that the now-concluded campaign was free from the deep fear that permeated the elections of 1992, when both the MPLA and UNITA openly and vigorously armed their respective supporters in the run-up to the elections and subsequently. One observer of that time remarked to the Ambassador that supporters of both parties were so armed and tensions so high then that the outbreak of violence was inevitable. Another observer who was in Luanda during the '92 campaign said residents feared then the pick-up trucks filled with angry, drunk, armed young men, &campaigning⁸ for their respective parties, who terrified the population in the tense days leading up to the election. In contrast, the last day of official campaigning here yesterday (September 3) featured caravans of pick-up trucks and vans, filled with cheering, singing, flag-waving party campaigners, who evoked support and curiosity, but certainly not fear, from passers-by. In this significant way, Angola has moved smartly beyond a sad chapter in its history.

¶2. (SBU) According to the Embassy's own direct observations in Luanda and in the provinces and to leaders of the EU, SADC, AU, Pan-African Parliament, Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries and other international and national election observer groups, the campaign across Angola has been peaceful, despite scattered incidents of intimidation and violence (reftels). The Israeli Ambassador told the Ambassador that his survey of numerous Israeli companies scattered around Angola, including in the diamond-rich Lunda provinces and other provinces that were greatly impacted by fighting following the 1992 election, revealed consistent descriptions of the campaign atmosphere as akin to a festival or celebration, a marked contrast to the circumstances of 16 years ago.

¶3. (SBU) The National Election Commission (CNE) gets high marks from most Angolans and outside observers for its efforts to pull off these elections. Although at times a bit slow out of the starting blocks, the CNE has manifested high energy and creativity in utilizing untested and often vague electoral laws to guide election preparations. The CNE, though at times hamstrung by bureaucracy and its top-down organization, seems genuine in its efforts to conduct the elections professionally. Even leaders of opposition parties have lauded the work of the Commission. Nonetheless, logistical snafus at the opening of some stations and throughout the voting day are inevitable, according to CNE President Caetano de Sousa. And, it remains to be seen whether election-day reality will reflect de Sousa's optimism that the CNE's nationwide network of trouble shooters will quickly resolve any logistical problems,

enabling balloting to proceed smoothly. In any case, these elections have been a learning process for the CNE. As Caetano de Sousa said to the Ambassador on September 3, these experiences will prove invaluable as the Commission prepares for future elections.

¶4. (SBU) Despite the peaceful nature of the campaign and the CNE's diligence in organizing the elections, these elections cannot be considered &fair8 by any definition of that term. Enjoying the advantages of incumbency, the ruling MPLA has taken full advantage of the government's control of the nation's only daily newspaper, the nation's only nationwide radio network, and the nation's only television channels. Although the state media have given limited news coverage and the legally mandated air time (five minutes a day for TV and 10 minutes daily for radio) to each of the 14 contending parties, the air waves and the daily newspaper are overwhelmingly dominated by generous coverage of the MPLA and the MPLA-led government's reconstruction projects. Adding to the unbalanced coverage, the state media go out of their way to give a negative twist to their already minimal news coverage of the opposition. For example, recent TV coverage of a UNITA rally carried footage of the rally shot from a side angle that suggested the rally was sparsely attended, which was not the case. MPLA also takes full advantage of its access to state resources, dispatching ministers and other government personnel throughout the country to campaign for the party as they carry out government business, blurring, if not erasing, the lines between government and party. As Louisa Morgantini, head of the EU Election Observer Delegation here, put it, &You can never distinguish whether an act is an act of government or of the MPLA.⁸

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THE EMBASSY'S TAKE

¶5. (SBU) We believe tomorrow's elections will be peaceful and credible. Peaceful in the sense that voters will not be subjected to an orchestrated campaign of intimidation or violence, though we anticipate scattered, spontaneous outbursts by voters frustrated by snags in electoral logistics or by party zealots who get swept up in the emotions of the moment. Credible in the sense that participants in the election process, i.e., the voters and the various political parties, will accept and live with the results of the elections, despite the inevitable legal disputes and allegations that will arise from the process's many imperfections and shortcomings. Most importantly, we believe these elections will bolster confidence in the electoral process and, thus, set the stage for presidential elections next year and municipal elections thereafter, a significant initial step forward on Angola's long path to democracy.

¶6. (SBU) In terms of assessing the electoral equation, we find several significant undefined variables, specifically, how do those Angolans who have yet personally to benefit from Angola's explosive economic growth, i.e., the vast majority of the voters, manifest on election day their reality that they are on the short end of Angola's economic stick. We see three possible courses of action for these voters: express dissatisfaction by staying home on election day; express dissatisfaction by voting for anyone except the MPLA; or, vote for MPLA because that is the only party that they have known and, besides, the opposition parties do not offer appealing alternatives. Our sense is that by and large the MPLA will reap a peace benefit, garnering good support from Angolans who are motivated most by their appreciation for the peace of the past six years. In contrast, middle-class, better-educated Angolans, especially those in Luanda, may choose to vent their frustration by staying home tomorrow. In sum, we forecast that the MPLA will win the election in the sense that it will secure a majority of the seats in the new 220-seat National Assembly. Whether the MPLA secures the

more than two-thirds majority needed to rewrite the Constitution on its own is an open question.

¶7. (SBU) As a last thought, we suggest that once the dust settles from this election and if the MPLA emerges with a comfortable victory, President Dos Santos will launch de facto the presidential election campaign, recognizing that he and his party cannot count on a peace dividend to deliver victory next time, that he must work now to keep voter support by endeavoring that more Angolans benefit from the nation's wealth.

MOZENA